

Lent Unplugged for some Hillhurst United Church members

Sabbath Manifesto part of Easter spiritual journey

BY MARIO TONEGUZZI, CALGARY HERALD MARCH 21, 2014



From right, Rev. John Pentland, of Hillhurst United Church, Pam Rocker and Alyssa Kelle, in Calgary. Church members have gone on a Lenten fast during the Sabbath with not using their electronic devices.
Photograph by: Stuart Gradon , Calgary Herald

CALGARY - Some members of the Hillhurst United Church in Calgary have embarked on a unique spiritual journey in preparation for Easter.

They've combined the Catholic practice of fasting during Lent with the Jewish custom of Sabbath.

"The idea around the Sabbath Manifesto was inspired by the Jewish tradition of refraining from some activities from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. What I love about this is not only the deletion of something, but a mindful addition or integration," said Pam Rocker, affirming and creative coordinator for the church. "On the Sabbath Manifesto website, they mention 10 principles to follow, but they are open to each individual's unique interpretation.

"For example, the obvious, avoid technology, but also drink wine, eat bread, give back, find silence. In letting go of technology, for me it's important that it's done with meaning, because I don't want to see technology as a treat or the letting go of it as a punishment, but as a means to put more time or energy into what I truly value."

Rocker said it's easy to log off mentally when we are always logged into our emails or Facebook. In-person intimacy or even picking up a book can be uncomfortable, but at our core we know it's something that we need as part of a whole life, she said.

"Lent is not just about letting go, but about holding on, creating room for life. It's this balance of perspective that is key - and who doesn't want to be told to drink wine," Rocker added.

One member of the congregation, 10-year-old Adam Yates-Laberge said the idea was really hard at first.

"I didn't like it at all. But then, our whole family sat in the living room and just talked to each other. Sometimes we were reading books, but we were all there," he said.

When asked how it felt to go back to technology on Saturday evening, he said: "We were so excited to watch TV. But I would do it again. It was really fun to just hang out and talk."

Rev. John Pentland, of the church, said the season of Lent is a time of reflection, self examination, a time to journey inward. It is a focused time of big questions such as Who am I ? Why am I here? What is my purpose? What does God invite me toward? How can I connect?

He said Protestants don't usually give things up for Lent but rather see it as a time to re-orient themselves and their place in the world.

"Jesus did this classically in the story of the temptation in the wilderness that kicks Lent off. The wilderness wasn't an isolated treed forest, it was an urban place of temptation all about. Lent invites a shift in perception," he said.

"I love the honesty we are invited into in Lent. It is a slowing down. It is an invitation to realness. It is a period that focuses on the recognition of our humanity. It is eyes wide open examination. It leads to a real life not pretend life. It isn't all about guilt and shame, as much as it is about truth and humility. It invites realness with ourselves and our place in the world."

Pentland said religion and spirituality are at their core about real relationships. The idea of the Sabbath Manifesto was an invitation to people to focus on the relationships that are important. Their selves, their significant others and their place in God's world.

Sometimes we are distracted by technology.

"For me, I chose to unplug from my iPhone only for 24 hours following the Jewish sabbath. It isn't much time, but it still was challenging. It was actually freeing to be out of commission. People get annoyed if we don't get immediate replies to life. I confess I do too," said Pentland. "We are all dependent on people having their own phones. We use them to wake up, to make appointments, to photograph, to get directions, to know what the weather is, to follow world events and kids calendars. They connect us to literally anything we want.

"I think we are way to hooked up. Kids especially, but adults are as bad. We are addicted to connection. But there is connection in social media that is awesome . . . The invitation to unplug, reorients, awakens and invites us to reconsider our daily life. It is an honest way of reflection."

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